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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001625

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ SPINS ELECTORAL RESULTS UNDERSCORING THE  
PSUV'S DOMINANCE

CARACAS 00001625 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: Chavez is seeking to spin the electoral results of the November 23 state and local elections to his favor. In a nationally-televised, five-hour long November 24 press conference with international journalists, the Venezuelan president blasted media reporting that his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) had "lost" in key races. Chavez pointed to higher voter turn-out, stressed his candidates' overall success in mayoral races, and asserted that his PSUV party demonstrated a one million vote advantage over the opposition. In the same press conference, Chavez said he was amenable to a "people's initiative" to eliminate presidential term limits. Chavez appears to be trying to shape public perceptions that he retains overwhelming electoral strength as he considers revisiting the presidential term limits issue. Venezuela actually appears almost evenly divided between the PSUV and all other parties and eliminating presidential term limits, defeated once already by voters, is by no means an easy hurdle. End Summary.

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CHAVISMO THE WINNER?  
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12. (C) Chavez took the international media to task at a five-hour press conference November 24 for reporting that the results of the state and local elections were a loss for his PSUV party. At the media event, which was broadcast by mandatory "cadena" via radio and TV, he sought to paint the electoral results as favorable to Chavismo. The President reported that the PSUV had won 77 percent of the governorships and 80 percent of mayorships, and that those who had "betrayed" the revolution -- pro-government dissident candidates -- "had died politically." He pointed out that the PSUV won in Sucre, Guarico, Trujillo and Aragua states (and took the capital in Carabobo), all areas where sitting governors broke with the PSUV. The complete results for the mayorships had still not been released as of the morning of November 25, but preliminary results indicate that the PSUV won big (over 280 wins versus less than 60 for the opposition). The lack of electoral alliances among opposition candidates in many mayoral races was an important factor in the PSUV's strong showing at the municipal level.

13. (C) Chavez asserted that the PSUV had received 20 percent more votes -- 5,504,902 in total -- since the failed referendum in December 2007, which was lost largely because

of abstentionism among Chavista voters. Chavez contended that the opposition had actually lost 10 percent of its votes -- out of a total of about 4,280,000 -- yielding a lead of some 1,300,000 votes for Chavismo over the opposition. According to news reports based on the CNE, the margin between the PSUV (5,422,064) and the opposition (4,417,497) was slightly smaller, and excluded 463,372 votes listed as going to "dissident" candidates as well as another 200,000 or so votes went to independent, non-aligned parties. There were also 459,000 nullified votes. If one were to add the unified opposition, dissident and independent votes as a non-Chavista voting bloc, the total is over 5 million votes.

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CONTROVERSY IN TACHIRA, BARINAS  
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14. (C) Tachira and Barinas States are the only gubernatorial races where there remains some controversy. PSUV supporters in Tachira have asked the CNE for a recount, and director of the local electoral office Bladmir Perez told the press November 24 that the challenge would be passed to Caracas for the CNE to decide. In Barinas, PSUV dissident gubernatorial candidate Julio Cesar Reyes -- who lost to Chavez's brother, Adan, by about 5 percent -- has claimed electoral fraud and asked for a vote audit. Reyes claims that the results were clearly irregular, noting that PSUV deputy Marcos Garrido called him at 5 p.m. on November 23 to congratulate him for his win. The closely contested race, in Chavez's home state, is perhaps the most likely to have encouraged some degree of fraud. Adan Chavez was running to replace his father, Hugo de los Reyes, who was ineligible for a third reelection. Former GBRV Ambassador Ignacio Arcaya told us that when he served as Minister of Interior in 2002,

CARACAS 00001625 002.2 OF 002

Chavez told him to ensure that Hugo de los Reyes was elected.

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TERM LIMITS  
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15. (SBU) Regarding the effort to revive the issue of constitutional term limits, the President commented that "I have said that I will not propose (a referendum), but neither can I avoid that someone will do it (for me) because it is the right of the people given to them by the Constitution, that these same people approved in the referendum." He added that the PSUV could propose a referendum on term limits under the Constitution, but noted that "that is not my priority right now." According to Article 341 of the Venezuelan constitution, the amendment process can be initiated by 15 percent of registered citizens or 30 percent of the deputies in the National Assembly. A public referendum should then be held within 30 days of the petition process or National Assembly vote. The opposition -- and most constitutional lawyers -- contend that it would be unconstitutional for any party to put to a referendum the elimination of presidential term limits because this proposal was already defeated at the polls in the December 2007 constitutional referendum. Another possibility, although less likely, is a call for a constituent assembly that would seek to draft a new Constitution with no-term limits.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) President Chavez remains politically popular and his PSUV is by far the strongest political party in Venezuela. One of Chavez's key victories in the state and local elections has been the failure of any dissident candidate to win a governorship, shoring up the PSUV and its machine as the only "revolutionary" game in town. Moreover, the small left-wing parties Podemos and Patria Para Todos now have no

governors and will be hard-pressed to demonstrate a viable "third way" between government and opposition.

¶7. (C) Chavez now appears eager to initiate the process of eliminating presidential term limits in 2009 from a position of perceived electoral strength. Chavez and his advisors understand that launching such a bid would be difficult if he were to acknowledge that the the opposition had been able to match his strength at the polls. Thus, by not factoring in the dissident vote and the votes for independent parties, he is trying to show that his PSUV has a million votes on the oppsition. The reality, however, is that Venezuela remains almost evenly divided between pro- and anti-Chavistas, and getting public approval for the elimination of presidential term limits is by no means a foregone conclusion.

CAULFIELD